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A Call for Hospitality:
Learning from a Particular Example of Women's Grass Roots Practice of
Receptive Ecumenism in the U.K.

Abstract

During the past decade, global conferences on Receptive Ecumenism have directed ecumenists' attention to the importance of hospitality for the flourishing of Receptive Ecumenism; this has been discussed conceptually, but not yet with respect to practice. In order to explore a practical example of hospitality within Receptive Ecumenism, I draw on a case study concerning a particular group of Catholic women in the Midlands, U.K. who organize small-scale, women-only Receptive Ecumenism conferences at grass roots. Through reflecting theologically upon their practices, important learning arises, which shapes the nature of hospitality required for Receptive Ecumenism. Further to this, against the backdrop of Christ's radical hospitality, a prophetic call unfolds, which challenges the churches' own hospitality to women and their reception of women's gifts.

Introduction¹

Responding to the question about which virtues or values are necessary for Receptive Ecumenism to flourish, ecumenists Paul Murray, David Pascoe and Antonia Pizzey have identified hospitality as one of the 'core values' or 'virtues' required for Receptive Ecumenism.² In order to explore a practical example of

¹ I am indebted to those who commented on earlier versions of this essay, presented at the Annual Conference of the Society of the Study of Theology in Nottingham, U.K., April 2018 and the 10th Anniversary Conference of the Centre of Catholic Studies, Durham University, U.K., April 2018. Also, to Antonia Pizzey and Sara Gehlin, who generously shared their unpublished work with me and, to the Revd Dr Nigel Rooms for pointing me to Luke Bretherton's work.

² Paul D. Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning - Establishing the Agenda," in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5-25, 16; David Pascoe, "Hospitality Grounded in Humility: A Foundation for Inter-Ecclesial Learning," presented at *Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Learning to be Church Together* (Durham University, U.K., January 2009); Antonia Pizzey, 'The Receptive Ecumenical Spirit: the Role of the Virtues in Guiding Receptive Ecumenical

this, I draw on a case study involving a group of Catholic women in the Midlands, U.K., who organise and host small-scale, Receptive Ecumenism conferences for women-only at grass roots.³ Through reflecting theologically upon their practices, important learning arises, which, I argue, informs the particular nature of hospitality required for Receptive Ecumenism. Further to this, through reflecting upon the women's practices against the backdrop of Christ's radical hospitality, a prophetic call unfolds, which challenges the churches' own hospitality to women and their reception of women's gifts. Before we turn to the case study in question, I shall briefly summarise the key movements in Receptive Ecumenism.

What is Receptive Ecumenism?

Simply put, Receptive Ecumenism comprises a Church holding out its hands to receive the gifts from another tradition; a key feature of the open hands is that they bear wounds which need healing, rather than being hands which are already whole. In light of this, Receptive Ecumenism begins by creating space for churches to pause, examine themselves and ask, 'where are we broken?' or, 'are there areas of church life which need healing?' Healing may be sought with respect to a Church's theological-doctrinal webs and the ways in which these are both: a) complicit in the problems and b) in need of scrutiny and reconfiguring if the desired practical learning is going to be possible, with integrity. Added to this, churches might reflect upon aspects of organisation, leadership, culture, or, mission and evangelism.⁴ Having examined themselves, recognising that they are

Discernment and Decision- Making', *IVth International Conference on Receptive Ecumenism: Discernment, Decision Making and Reception* in Canberra, Australia, November 2017, see http://arts-ed.csu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2875415/Leaning-into-the-Spirit-Conference-booklet.pdf (accessed 30/01/18, 14.15).

³ Differences of opinion exist concerning the usage of 'Catholic' and 'Roman Catholic'. Note that throughout this essay I apply 'Catholic' when speaking about the women concerned since this is how they speak about themselves.

⁴ Paul D. Murray, "Searching the Living Truth of the Church in Practice: On the Transformative Task of Systematic Ecclesiology," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 4 (2013): 251-81, 278. For examples of churches coming together to examine areas such as those named above, see footnote 8 of this essay. At the *IVth International Conference on Receptive Ecumenism* in Canberra, Australia, November 2017, Dr Sara Gehlin from the Church of Sweden Research Department spoke on her research with churches in

not yet imaging Christ as fully as they might, churches are called to repent.⁵ The following key move in Receptive Ecumenism involves one church listening to and learning from another. Having identified an area which requires healing, a Church seeks to learn from another tradition regarding respective practices. Thus, one church asks of another, 'what gifts might you share which speak to the areas in which we are wounded?' After key learnings have been shared, a church moves on to discern which gifts it may receive with integrity.⁶

Receptive Ecumenism requires hope, because it testifies to the belief that the unity of the churches is the will of God. Unity is not the work of humankind, but rather the transforming work of the Spirit, who is calling churches to grow visibly together in structural and sacramental unity.⁷ In light of this, Receptive Ecumenism is not a quick fix nor a short-term project, but a commitment made by churches to journeying towards unity with one another. When churches come together through Receptive Ecumenism, their encounter is formational, which is how Receptive Ecumenism overlaps with Spiritual Ecumenism.⁸

Participation in Receptive Ecumenism is possible in a variety of contexts. For example, 'Churches Together in England' and the 'South Australian Council of Churches' have each produced accessible pamphlets with ideas for practising Receptive Ecumenism at grass roots.⁹ More formally, churches in the North East

Sweden. They engaged in Receptive Ecumenism with a view to understanding one another's approaches to mission and evangelism, and consequently enriching practice.

⁵ Thomas J. Reese SJ, "Organizational Factors Inhibiting Receptive Catholic Learning," in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 346-58, 354.

⁶ For a clear summary and critique of the philosophical thought underlining Receptive Ecumenism, see Nicholas Adams, 'Long-Term Disagreement: Philosophical Models in Scriptural Reasoning and Receptive Ecumenism'. *Modern Theology* 29, no. 4 (2013): 154-71.

⁷ Paul, D. Murray, "Introducing Receptive Ecumenism," *The Ecumenist* 51, no. 2 (2014): 1-7, 2.

⁸ Observe the strong resonances with Cardinal Kasper's Spiritual Ecumenism in *That They May All Be One: The Call to Unity Today* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004), 155-72; Callan Slipper, *Enriched by the Other: A Spiritual Guide to Receptive Ecumenism*. Grove Spirituality, S139. (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2016).

⁹[https://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/246101/Home/Resources/Theology/Receptive Ecumenism/Receptive Ecumenism.aspx](https://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/246101/Home/Resources/Theology/Receptive_Ecumenism/Receptive_Ecumenism.aspx);

of England collaborated with Durham University in a five year research project with a view to the churches learning and receiving from one another regarding three principle areas; namely, Governance and Finance, Leadership and Ministry, and Learning and Formation.¹⁰ At an international level, Receptive Ecumenism has been applied for the third phase of ARCIC.¹¹ The particular context for this case study is the Midlands, U.K. It focuses upon the ecumenical work of four Catholic women, who, inspired by Receptive Ecumenism, have organised and hosted small-scale conferences; the aim of these is to create a space for women, who come from varied Christian traditions, to learn and receive gifts from one another.

Case Study

Whilst Pizzey, Murray and Pascoe have discussed hospitality conceptually, as far as I am aware, this is the first analysis of the outworking of hospitality within Receptive Ecumenism, which explores both the theological and practical implications.¹² During 2017-2018, I have been journeying with members of the Ecumenical and Interfaith Group (EIG) of the National Board of Catholic Women (NBCW) in the U.K., engaging with them through participant observation, formal one-to-one interviews and informal conversations.¹³ The hospitality I (as an

http://www.sacc.asn.au/en/index.php?rubric=en_receptive+ecumenism accessed 30.05.2018, 10.30am.

¹⁰The reports of the learnings are available on the Durham University website, <https://www.dur.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs/projects/receptiveecumenism/projects/> accessed 30.05.2018, 11am.

¹¹ The Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) employed Receptive Ecumenism through the seventh meeting of its current phase (ARCIC III) in Erfurt, Germany, 14–20 May, 2017. The Commission completed an agreed statement to be published in 2018, entitled, *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to be Church – Local, Regional, Universal*.

¹² This reflection is situated within broader research conducted in conjunction with the Ecumenical and Interfaith Group (EIG) of the National Board of Catholic Women (NBCW), with whom I am working to explore the experiences of women who work in English churches through Receptive Ecumenism. All data gathered is recorded, transcribed, analysed and used only with permission.

¹³ “The National Board of Catholic Women actively seeks to promote the presence, participation and responsibilities of Catholic Women in the Church and society, in order to enable them to fulfill their evangelical mission and to work for the common good”, Angela Perkins and Verena Wright (eds.), *Healing Priesthood: Women’s Voices Worldwide*

Anglican) have received from these women, during individual and group interviews, spending time with them informally, and through participating in their conferences, strengthened my decision to explore the importance of hospitality to Receptive Ecumenism. In various forms, the women have worked together ecumenically across a number of church traditions for over thirty years. Since 2013, they have organised and hosted five annual conferences in order that women may engage with one another through practising Receptive Ecumenism. 102 women have participated in the conferences to date, from churches such as Assemblies of God, Salvation Army, Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, Methodist, Baptist and United Reformed. The roles the women attending have played within their churches vary from ordained, holy orders, through to women who serve in children's ministries or organise refreshments. Below is an outline of a typical conference:

- Welcome with Tea/Coffee
- Prayer and Scripture Reflection
- Introduction to Receptive Ecumenism
- Four Short Talks by women from different traditions
- Gathering together for discussion in small groups
- Lunch
- Group discussions based around the theme and talks; the practising of Receptive Ecumenism
- Gathering together the themes and feedback
- Closing Prayer and Farewell

The short talks comprise around fifteen minutes, in which a speaker shares her experience on a particular topic; for example, 'prayer', 'ministry' and 'women in the church' have been discussed.

Since I regularly meet Christians who have not heard of Receptive Ecumenism, I was curious to learn what it was about this way of ecumenical

(London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), ix. For further details, see <http://www.nbcw.co.uk>, accessed 22/03/2018, 10am.

engagement that had inspired the members of the EIG to the extent that they should want to put it into action. They explained that they had initially heard about it through their connections with the Centre of Catholic Studies at Durham University. The women's relationship with the Centre stems from a shared Catholic faith and the desire to 'support the public witness and engagement which is promoted through the Centre'.¹⁴ On learning about Receptive Ecumenism, the women had been drawn initially to the emphasis on 'listening, learning and receiving gifts' from other Christian traditions. Added to this, each of the women believe 'churches should be in unity', whilst observing that 'the temperature in contemporary ecumenism is an ecumenical winter'.¹⁵ The women spoke with an open acknowledgement of how 'the Holy Spirit has inspired and guided' their work. They saw 'new possibilities for ecumenism through the fresh approach offered by Receptive Ecumenism' and as another woman commented, 'it is an interesting aspect of ecumenism which is worth exploring', so they decided to 'put it to the test'.

From enveloping the day in prayer and Scripture reflection through to refreshments and lunch, the women's beliefs about and practices of hospitality underline the organisation and duration of the gatherings. Since what constitutes Christian hospitality is widely debated, I situate the reflection within the context of current debates on hospitality. I argue that the EIG practices develop our understanding of the practice of hospitality within Receptive Ecumenism, highlighting key points to consider. When considered in light of Christ's radical hospitality, I argue, it serves as a prophetic call to the churches regarding their own hospitality to women and reception of women's gifts.

What is Hospitality?

At the turn of the millennium Jacques Derrida asked, 'Will we ever know what hospitality is?' acknowledging that despite writing at length on the subject, he

¹⁴ I apply quotation marks when I cite the women directly.

¹⁵ William Rusch, "Impressive Theological Agreement During the So-called "Ecumenical Winter", *Ecclesiology* 6, no. 2 (2010): 201-06.

had not yet arrived at an answer.¹⁶ Hospitality conjures up different images: it might consist of a meal in a hotel and thus relate to the 'hospitality industry' or it might be the food eaten at the house of a friend or family member. Scripture and the Christian tradition witnesses to a different kind of hospitality: God's hospitality.¹⁷ The Christian belief that hospitality begins in God has been acknowledged since the early church; for example, fourth century bishop, Gregory of Nazianzus writes,

'You will never surpass God's generosity even if you hand over your entire substance and yourself into the bargain... No matter how much you offer, what always remains is more; and you will be giving nothing of your own because all things come from God... we cannot outdo God in our gifts, for we do not give anything that is not God's or that surpasses God's own bounty'.¹⁸

Along with Gregory, for centuries, Christians have recognised a particular kind of hospitality, which is rooted in God. This is recognised in the uniqueness of the incarnation of Christ in which God demonstrates radically God's hospitality to the whole world, through to the simple breaking of bread shared on the road to Emmaus, in which Jesus is revealed as both host and guest (Luke 24.13-35).¹⁹

Over the past few decades, theologians have urged that we do not confuse

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 5, no. 3 (2000): 3-18. Both Emmanuel Lévinas and Derrida relate hospitality to identity; Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Responsibility for the Other', in *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985).

¹⁷ For example; David B. Gowler, *Host, Guest, Enemy, and Friend: Portraits of the Pharisees in Luke and Acts* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Minnesota: Collegesville, 2000); Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Oration 14.22, Martha Pollard Vinson, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Select Orations* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 55, (with amendments).

¹⁹ For an excellent theological summary of hospitality, see Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 13-32, 19.

hospitality with ‘entertaining’.²⁰ The kind of ‘entertaining’ to which they refer encompasses: hosting family and friends in one’s home, the tea/coffee and biscuits after a church service, through to commercial catering. For example, feminist theologian Letty Russell disputes the inclusion of ‘tea and crumpets’ which, she argues, conjures up notions of ‘terminal niceness’ and to which she would refuse a place at the hospitality table.²¹ Henri Nouwen has also critiqued ‘soft sweet kindness, tea parties, bland conversations and a general atmosphere of cosiness’.²² Further to this, in *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Christine Pohl argues, quite rightly, that hospitality should only be called ‘Christian’ if it involves a welcome of the stranger. She draws on the New Testament writing of hospitality as *philoxenia*, which means literally ‘love of strangers.’ However, the case study in her book locates ‘the strangers’ as being those persons who are most vulnerable in our communities.²³ Thus, according to Pohl, Russell and Nouwen, hospitality is only ‘Christian’ when it operates with a particular concept of the ‘stranger’ as one who is ‘vulnerable’ in some way.

On the one hand, I wholly support the arguments for a ‘radical hospitality’ which entails that churches open their arms to those who are refugees, the homeless and the vulnerable; these reminders are timely and enable Christians to think through how we image God’s hospitality and welcome. However, in the literature discussed, everyday cultural practices, through which the Spirit reveals God’s presence, are devalued at the expense of recovering a wholly radical interpretation of hospitality. Since ‘our hospitality both reflects and

²⁰ See Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), xiii; Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2007), 24.

²¹ Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 19.

²² Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (London: Collins, 1976), 64.

²³ Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

participates in God's hospitality',²⁴ I contend that we must allow hospitality to reflect the myriad ways in which the Spirit reveals God's hospitality on earth.

Our understanding should be able to encompass different kinds of welcome, both the 'radical' and the 'everyday', since as Elizabeth Johnson argues, 'God's presence in the world through the power of the Spirit is evidenced by —ordinary people in ordinary time'.²⁵ The context of Johnson's argument is one in which she calls for a fresh vision of the communion of saints, which, rather than depicting paradigmatic characters, should encompass the whole body of Christ. In the same way, I argue that if we define hospitality in such a way as to refer to radical acts of welcome only, we risk undermining the broader practices of welcome through which God is present. Relating to this, Maurice Hamington observes, 'the guest and host live a corporeal existence. Therefore hospitality often engages tending to the needs of the body in forms of food, drink, rest, and so on'.²⁶ I extend his argument by stating that we are also located culturally, the impact of which should not be underestimated. Overlooked in discussions on Christian hospitality is that in England at least, the consumption of 'tea and biscuits', or some such equivalent, often forms the opening ritual which is an important aspect of the broader hospitality offered.

Thus far, I have argued that hospitality begins in God and concerns the reception and welfare of the stranger. This reaches from offering refreshment through to ensuring those received are in a place of safety. Let us turn now to reflect upon the specific practices of hospitality within the Receptive Ecumenism conferences facilitated by the EIG of the NBCW. As we move through the way the conference is organised, we observe a kind of hospitality which not only welcomes and learns from the stranger, but also creates a safe space for gifts to be received. Moreover, I argue, the hospitality offered by the EIG points to important learning for the practice of Receptive Ecumenism.

²⁴ Pohl, *Making Room*, 172. See also, Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 27.

²⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 228.

²⁶ Maurice Hamington, "Toward a Theory of Feminist Hospitality " *Feminist Formations* 22, no. 1 (2010): 21-38, 22.

Hospitality through the Receptive Ecumenism Conference

I begin by considering the location of the conferences because the question of where to host the conferences was an important consideration to the group. Jacques Derrida's discussions of narcissism draw attention to the way in which the host maintains a degree of power over the guest, since it is possible that the host invites the guest into their space in order to be in control of the encounter.²⁷ When hospitality occurs without any room for reciprocity, the encounter becomes a breeding ground for reliance and debts. Ideally then, the host creates space for not only giving, but also receiving. Recognising this, and deciding that they wanted to use well their position of power as hosts, the group observed that it was 'important not to hold the gathering on Catholic ground'. One of the women commented, 'we wanted to create a space in which we were received as well as receiving so that it is truly receptive'. Thus, they opted to host the conference in a Methodist hall, sharing the hosting with others. By making this move, they were both received and receiving.

As the women gather together from various parts of the Midlands, tea/coffee and biscuits/cake are offered. According to the EIG, the food and drink on arrival performs more than one function. It 'provides refreshment for those who have travelled to the gathering, at the same time providing space for women to gather themselves for the day ahead'. As I observed earlier, the English custom of drinking tea is often equated with being made to feel at ease; this, in turn sets the scene for a comfortable space in which guests feel safe.²⁸ Safety of the participants is crucial to Receptive Ecumenism, as we shall discuss shortly.

Once the women are refreshed, the day begins in prayer and a reflection on Scripture. The group's rationale behind this is that 'hospitality begins in God, expressing an aspect of God's character'. Through beginning in prayer, we locate ourselves and our stories in God. Ecumenist Michael Putney has highlighted,

²⁷ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 34.

²⁸ For a practical consideration of how we consider both being English and Christian; see Nigel Rooms, *The Faith of the English: Integrating Christ and Culture* (London: SPCK, 2011).

quite rightly, that it 'would be a mistake when talking about unity between the churches or the unity within any one Christian community to start with or focus upon the relationship of Christians with each other'.²⁹ Moreover, as one of the women commented, 'prayer together affirms that it is the Spirit who we trust to lead us forward into unity'. Through prayer, both the hosts and guests are locating God as the host, who provides for their needs. This highlights the importance of prayer at the beginning and throughout engagement with Receptive Ecumenism.

Following prayer, Scripture reflection and a brief introduction to Receptive Ecumenism, 'four women from different Christian traditions speak about their experience of living in their tradition'. As I have already discussed, women from various churches speak on a particular topic which has been agreed upon beforehand. One of the EIG spoke about how 'we thought long and hard about the topics, because we wanted to address issues which are relevant to women... we've seen a lot of men in press photographs concerned with Receptive Ecumenism and we wanted to create space for women to receive from one another'.³⁰

During one of the gatherings women presented on their views, experience and practice of various forms of ministry. The women I spoke to were keen to emphasise that they 'discussed ministry with a small 'm', since Catholic women are not permitted to enter into ordained ministry'.³¹ These talks allow the women present to enter into each other's worlds, at least with respect to their churches.³² As Richard writes, 'hospitality involves a way of thinking without the

²⁹ Michael Putney, "A Catholic Understanding of Ecumenical Dialogue," in *My Ecumenical Journey*, ed. Elizabeth Delaney, Gerard Kelly and Ormond Rush (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2014), 184.

³⁰ One such example is the third phase of ARCIC; 4 of the 22 participants are women, see [https://www.anglicancentreinrome.org/Groups/194769/Anglican Centre in/What we do/Ecumenical Dialogues/ARCIC III/ARCIC III.aspx](https://www.anglicancentreinrome.org/Groups/194769/Anglican%20Centre%20in%20What%20we%20do/Ecumenical%20Dialogues/ARCIC%20III/ARCIC%20III.aspx). Accessed 31.5.18, 2pm.

³¹ John Paul II spoke on containing the tradition of reserving priestly ordination to men alone in the Roman Catholic Church in his Apostolic Letter, 'Ordinatio Sacerdotalis', https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html, accessed 10.5.2018

³² Miroslav Volf writes, 'The will to embrace precedes any "truth" about others'; see *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 29.

presumption of knowing beforehand what is in the mind of the other; dialogue with the other is essential... to welcome the other means the willingness to enter the world of the other'.³³ Through listening to one another, the women are able 'to discern more clearly through prayer and discussion the wounds and gifts of their own traditions'.

Following these talks, the women present are invited to gather into smaller groups to begin to reflect on what they have heard in relation to their own context and church tradition. After lunch, these groups continue; through careful facilitation, the women discuss challenges and reflect upon gifts which might be received.

The fact that these small groups consist of only women raises an important question regarding to whom hospitality is offered at these conferences. During our time together, I witnessed the women discussing at length the issue of whether groups should be mixed or women-only. As one woman commented, 'the decision to restrict the gathering to women-only was not made lightly'. This decision was made for a number of reasons, some with more serious implications than others. On the one hand, the group thought that women would be 'ideally suited to practising Receptive Ecumenism because women are so often the ones listening, we get a lot of practice'. Since research demonstrates that women are more inclined to speak in groups in which women only are present, the organisers decided 'to restrict the gatherings to women so that women would be able to speak as freely as possible'.³⁴ Further to this, one of the group said with feeling, 'women needed to be given the opportunity to speak uninterrupted and not be diminished'. It was her belief that a mixed group would not provide such a 'free space for women to share safely'. Power and safety are key issues within Receptive Ecumenism. Feeling safe is essential, since exposing wounds renders a person and/or a Church vulnerable; therefore this move is made more successfully if the one bearing wounds experiences a safe environment.

This relates to broader issues within Receptive Ecumenism, which arise

³³ Lucien Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 12.

³⁴ Gloria Bonder, *The New Information Technologies and Women: Essential Reflections* (Santiago, Chile: United Nations Publications, 2003), 30.

in light of asymmetrical relations. For example, after I had spoken about Receptive Ecumenism, an ordained Anglican woman asked, 'why would I want to receive a gift from someone who will not recognise my vocation and ministry?' She added, 'I am not sure I would want to come vulnerably with wounded hands into a space where my ministry is not recognised'.³⁵ Whilst she was not speaking on behalf of all women, she raises a serious question with which we must grapple in relation to hospitality within Receptive Ecumenism. We must contend for the best practice which creates the space for women to be involved in all levels of Receptive Ecumenism, from grass roots through to formal discussions, recognising that women 'can make a valuable contribution'. Believing that 'God affirms all women', the EIG have created a space in which women may freely and as safely as possible share their gifts. Added to this, hospitality is also a matter of human "exchanges which restore the spirit."³⁶

As we turn to discuss the implications of the hospitality discussed, I draw on Luke Bretherton's work on Christian hospitality, in which Bretherton argues that hospitality 'is not an essentially domestic and apolitical kind of action'.³⁷ I shall argue that the women's practice, of both listening to and receiving one another's ministries, embodies the kind of radical hospitality practised by Christ in the New Testament. To make sense of my claim, we turn to the themes of purity and holiness which run through Old and New Testaments.

Hospitality, Purity and Holiness

In his book *Hospitality as Holiness*, Bretherton writes, 'Through his hospitality, which has as its focal point actual feasting and table fellowship, Jesus turns the world upside down'.³⁸ Bretherton argues this through a discussion of the continuity and discontinuity between hospitality in the Old Testament and the

³⁵ It is worth noting that whilst the Catholic Church formally and as an institution does not currently accept the validity of women's ordination, many of the members of the Catholic Church do recognise the validity of women's ordination.

³⁶ John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 19.

³⁷ Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 126.

³⁸ Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 129.

New Testament. In the Old Testament, hospitality is somewhat paradoxical. For example, Leviticus 19.33-34 exemplifies the way in which God calls Israel to hospitality: 'the Alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God'.³⁹ At the same time, there is a prevailing issue regarding purity and how Israel must keep itself clean.⁴⁰ Leviticus 11-15 and Numbers 19 describe the ritual impurity which results from contact with a variety of natural processes and substances. Hence, the Torah contains numerous purity rituals in order to protect Israel from becoming polluted by those with whom she comes into contact. In short, it is concerned with the holiness of Israel.⁴¹ Moving forward to the New Testament, Jesus does not resolve the 'tension between hospitality and holiness present in the Old Testament'.⁴² Rather, he brings together 'these two imperatives in a particular way. Jesus relates hospitality and holiness by inverting their relations: hospitality becomes the means of holiness'.⁴³ Neyrey's earlier work affirms Bretherton's thesis. He explores the relationship between meals and the purity system in Luke-Acts, arguing that the Pharisees eat with those with whom they share the same values.⁴⁴ He writes, 'Hence, the Pharisees criticise Jesus... for eating with tax collectors and sinners, because shared table fellowship implies that Jesus shares *their* world not God's world of holiness'.⁴⁵ Said another way, Christ's hospitality of pagans, sinners and those who are 'tainted' demonstrate his holiness because he restores them rather than being contaminated by them and thus requiring cleansing himself.

Let us consider how this works out in action by examining Luke 8.43-48, which describes the encounter between Jesus and a woman who has been

³⁹ Translations are from NRSV.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 130.

⁴¹ Baruch J. Schwartz et al. (eds.), *Perspectives on Purity and Purification in the Bible* (London: T&T Clark International, 2008).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Jerome H. Neyrey, "The Social World of Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 361-88, 364.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

bleeding for many years: 'She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her haemorrhage stopped' (44). Following usual purity laws, Jesus would have gone to the temple to be cleansed after experiencing physical contact from a bleeding woman, since she would be considered unclean. However, rather than requiring cleansing, Jesus' holiness contagiously cleanses the woman.⁴⁶ He heals her, restoring her to a right place amongst her people, rather than she tainting him. Later in Luke 10, Jesus tells the well-known parable of the Samaritan man, which recalls the demonstration of hospitality by a man who would be considered unclean by the Pharisees. Rather than using the parable to endorse purity teachings, Jesus tells those listening to 'Go and do likewise' (10.37) i.e. to go and show mercy to those outside the confines of their social and religious world. Thus, through actions and parables Jesus establishes a way of being, in which mercy and hospitality to those who are 'unclean' is prized. Noteworthy is that not only is this approach to holiness and hospitality inhabited by Jesus, but Christ establishes this as the preferred behaviour of his followers. This is mapped on to Acts 10, when Peter visits Cornelius, a Roman centurion and declares 'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean' (10.28). Later in the chapter (10.44) the Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentiles present, thus affirming Peter's inclusion of them.

In light of this, let us recall the women gathering to engage in Receptive Ecumenism and turn to reflect upon the hospitality offered to each woman present. Whilst many women flourish in churches and are fulfilled in various vocations, this is not true for all women.⁴⁷ There is not space enough to cite the vast body of literature which calls for a reception of each woman's gifts in the Body of Christ.⁴⁸ Even today, women's gifts are frequently rejected, especially if

⁴⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen, 1984), 135.

⁴⁷ For more on the idea of taint and disgust, see Richard Beck, *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality and Mortality* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011).

⁴⁸ See for example, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*. Translated by Fr. Stephen Bigham (Pasadena, California: Oakwood Publications, 1991); Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics." In *Image of God and Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, edited by Kari Elisabeth Børresen, 258-81 (Oslo: Solum Forag, 1991); Celia Viggo Wexler, *Catholic Women Confront their Church* (Maryland:

the gifts relate to teaching and preaching, or leadership. Added to this, many women have testified that little hospitality is offered regarding their involvement in the processes of decision-making and leadership of churches.⁴⁹ Through Receptive Ecumenism, after listening to one another, there is space for the women gathered to receive one another's gifts, even if these gifts are being rejected within the structural level of some of the churches. For example, women who testify to a vocation to preach, but are not allowed to pursue this in their own church are provided with a space not only to be affirmed, but also received as preachers.

Thus, in the same way that Jesus radically redefines hospitality by receiving and affirming those who are previously impure in relation to Torah, these gatherings of women function as a safe space in which gifts are received, which are otherwise rejected by churches. In light of this, I argue, the hospitality offered through these gatherings embodies the radical hospitality of Christ.

Conclusion

Reflecting upon the practice of hospitality within the small-scale Receptive Ecumenism conferences highlights important learning for Receptive Ecumenism more broadly.

First, these gatherings emphasise the importance of prayer, with regards to recognising that hospitality begins in God, and all gifts come from God. Also, it serves as a reminder that we look to the Spirit to lead the churches into transformation.

Secondly, the conferences raise questions pertaining to power: how do we use our power as hosts? Which location should we choose for Receptive Ecumenism? If the discussion is on a formal level: Whom do we invite? Who is excluded? Where relations are asymmetrical, what can we do to ensure this is

Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, "Living Testaments: How Catholic and Baptist Women in Ministry Both Judge and Renew the Church," *Ecclesial Practices* 4, no. 2 (2017): 167-98.

⁴⁹ <https://www.futurechurch.org/women-in-church-leadership/women-in-church-leadership/action/tips-for-advancing-women-in-church> (accessed 15/03/18, 18.10pm)

attended to with integrity?

Thirdly, the conferences determine the importance of safety, especially when asking individuals or churches to expose wounds. This can be expressed broadly, reaching from refreshments throughout a gathering, listening to and learning from the stranger, through to the more careful consideration of who is present. Whilst Receptive Ecumenism speaks of churches learning from one another, these conferences highlight that churches consist of persons, and each individual person present must feel safe for the flourishing of Receptive Ecumenism.

Lastly, when considered in light of Christ's own radical hospitality which receives and restores the stranger, I argue, the women's gathering for Receptive Ecumenism at grass roots serves as a prophetic voice, which not only calls to account the hospitality of our churches to women, but also calls for the reception of the whole breadth of women's gifts across the churches.